



To: Members of the New Jersey General Assembly

From: Isaiah M. Fudge, Director, Positive Youth Development Policy and Advocacy, Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Date: May 14, 2024

RE: SFY25 Budget - Restoration of Funding for NJ's Community Colleges

Dear Legislator:

In support of New Jersey's community colleges (CC), Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) asks for restoration of the \$20,000,000 in the Governor's budget for FY2025. I am aware of the powerful role community colleges play in the lives of youth and their caregivers. Reducing funding for these institutions would yield immediate and long-term negative effects on the youth and caregivers in their communities.

I know from firsthand experience the impact community colleges have on youth. I had no awareness of higher education throughout my K-12 experience. I was a youth at-risk, until enrolling in Essex County College (ECC). At ECC, I benefited from support programs and staff, and thrived, ultimately helping me succeed. Unfortunately, since this experience, ECC and other NJ community colleges have faced financial hardships, forcing increases in tuition. While initiatives like Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) help mitigate rising tuition, financial hardships have also produced reductions in support staff. Research shows that students, that youth, are most likely to succeed when supportive relationships are in place to help them. Cuts to the community college aid would likely mean cuts to critical support staff. For youth most at-risk—similar to my experience—the community college is an accessible on-ramp for success, filled with supportive staff members. But, FY2025 budget cuts would bluster student enrollment, and, where it did not, would ravage the supports they need to succeed.

Community colleges serve as vital spaces for youth development, particularly for vulnerable populations in cities like Newark, Camden, Trenton, and Passaic. We see partnership between the community college and community-based youth programs. In Newark, for instance, the reengagement hub—designed for youth disengaged from traditional high school—works collaboratively with ECC to introduce youth to higher education. Similar work takes place in Camden, Passaic and Trenton. Additionally, all 18 community colleges have dual-enrollment programming. And, the community college even positively impacts youth returning to society. Middlesex College's Center for Justice Impacted students, for example, provides access to higher education for youth detained in Middlesex and Camden counties respectively.

The community college benefits youth by benefitting the adults responsible for them, too. Many organizations turn to the community college for professional development and credentialing related to youth work. As the state struggles with teacher recruitment, for example, community colleges are places where new and returning students, and career changers can accrue enough credits to enter the teaching workforce. High risk interventionist teams are securing credentials through community colleges to enhance their benefit to the safety of youth. Community colleges also have childcare centers, ensuring parents returning to school have on-site childcare as they work to improve their circumstances.

If the proposed \$20,000,000 reduction ensues, all of this great work is threatened, immediately and inevitably divesting in our youth's development. Please help restore the funding.

Feel free to contact me at ifudge@acnj.org or 862-436-9108 if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Isaiah M. Fudge